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## ABSTRACT

The percentage of adults with high school diplomas is higher today than 10 years ago in every Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) state, but most SREB states will not reach the goal of 90 percent of all adults with high school diplomas or equivalent by 2000. The change is the result of state and local efforts to identify and attract more adults into programs that prepare them for General Educational Development (GED) tests and support program development. A serious challenge to the goal is that many adults without diplomas lack the basic skills expected when students enter high school. The following three types of state-administered programs prepare adults for GED tests: adult basic education, adult secondary education, and English as a second language. The Workforce Investment Act consolidates more than 50 federally funded employment-training and literacy programs into these three block grants for states: adult education and family literacy, disadvantaged youth, and adult employment and training. To improve adult education and literacy, states can use technology to provide staff development and training; use educational television and the Internet to deliver programs and courses; develop community-based efforts to coordinate educational services for adults; provide incentives to attract adults to programs; encourage partnerships; and focus on building literacy skills for parents and their children. (YLB)

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*A Challenge for SREB States:*

Increasing the Percentage  
of Adults With a  
High School Diploma

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EDUCATIONAL BENCHMARKS 2000 SERIES

# Goals for Education: Challenge 2000

BY THE YEAR 2000—

*All children will be ready for first grade.*

*Student achievement for elementary and secondary students will be at national levels or higher.*

*The school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.*

*90 percent of adults will have a high school diploma or its equivalent.*

*Four of every five students entering college will be ready to begin college-level work.*

*Significant gains will be achieved in the mathematics, sciences and communications competencies of vocational education students.*

*The percentage of adults who have attended college or earned two-year, four-year and graduate degrees will be at the national averages or higher.*

*The quality and effectiveness of all colleges and universities will be regularly assessed, with particular emphasis on the performance of undergraduate students.*

*All institutions that prepare teachers will have effective teacher-education programs that place primary emphasis on the knowledge and performance of graduates.*

*All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.*

*Salaries for teachers and faculty will be competitive in the marketplace, will reach important benchmarks and will be linked to performance measures and standards.*

*States will maintain or increase the proportion of state tax dollars for schools and colleges while emphasizing funding aimed at raising quality and productivity.*

The SREB Commission for Educational Quality, 1988

## ADULT EDUCATION

BY THE YEAR 2000—

*90 percent of adults will have a high school diploma or its equivalent.*

- "... set goals for education;
- ... measure progress toward the goals;
- ... report results to the public;
- ... make a strong case for the support necessary to be successful."

That was the SREB's challenge to state leaders in 1988 in *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000. Educational Benchmarks 1998*, the fifth biennial progress report on those 12 goals, shows that as we approach the year 2000 no SREB state is on track to reach all of the goals. It concludes that "we have made progress — and, in several areas, remarkable progress — but in no case can we claim that we have reached our goals."

This is the first of the SREB Educational Benchmarks 2000 series of reports. The Educational Benchmarks 2000 reports will focus on progress toward individual goals, states' actions to achieve the goals, lessons learned and what remains to be done.

*A Challenge for SREB States: Increasing the Percentage of Adults With a High School Diploma* is the first of these reports. State and local actions have made "dramatic progress" in increasing the percentage of young adults who complete high school and in attracting those who drop out of high school into other programs that lead to a high school credential.

In 1950, only 25 percent of adults age 25 and older in the SREB states had completed high school, meaning that 75 percent had not completed high school. Today, that situation is reversed. Fewer than 25 percent have not completed high school. That is remarkable progress.

But SREB states face challenges to increase further the percentage of adults — especially those of traditional work-force age — with a high school diploma. States must:

- reduce the number and percentage of working adults (ages 25 to 55) who do not have the basic reading, writing and mathematical skills necessary to begin a program leading to a high school credential;
- increase the percentage of young adults (under age 25) who complete high school or an alternative program that leads to a high school credential (such as a GED certificate); and
- improve the English language skills of those whose native language is not English.

According to the National Literacy Survey, 20 percent of American adults perform at the lowest level of literacy. Most of the adults in that survey were ages 25 to 55. In the SREB states, an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of adults perform at the lowest level of literacy. Thus, many of the people who will make up the work force early in the next century must

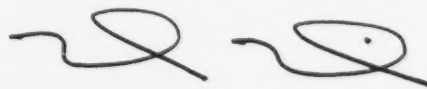
acquire basic literacy skills before they will be ready to begin programs that lead to a high school diploma or the equivalent. We cannot expect the percentage of adults with a high school diploma to increase until we reduce the percentage of adults in the work force who lack elementary reading, writing and computational skills.

In the 1990s record-high percentages of young people have completed high school or earned a high school credential through alternative programs. Such achievement reflects the success of states' efforts to reduce the number who drop out of school and to attract those who do drop out into programs that prepare them for an equivalent credential. Statistics show that few people over age 40 who do not have a high school diploma will prepare for and earn a high school credential. As a result, states must focus on getting younger adults into programs that prepare them for the General Educational Development tests or for other alternative programs that lead to a high school credential.

The SREB states are home to a growing number of people whose native language is not English. Already, one of every five people in adult education programs in the region is enrolled in a program that provides instruction in English to non-native speakers. Many of these people likely completed 12 years of school in their home country and need only to improve their English language skills to demonstrate their readiness to receive a high school credential.

We have come a long way, but much remains to be done.

Mark Musick  
SREB President



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## *A Challenge for SREB States:*

# Increasing the Percentage of Adults With a High School Diploma

The percentage of adults with high school diplomas is higher today in every SREB state than it was 10 years ago, but most SREB states will not reach the goal of having 90 percent of all adults with high school diplomas or the equivalent by 2000. States face real challenges in raising the percentages further.

Raising the basic literacy skills of at least 1.5 million people regionwide who are not ready to begin work on the high school level is the biggest challenge. It is likely that two-thirds of the adults who do not have high school diplomas will need intensive help just to get to a level at which they can begin studying for diplomas or the equivalent. Teaching immigrants whose native language is not English is another challenge. In 1996, more than 300,000

people in the SREB region were enrolled in classes to learn English as a second language.

Efforts by SREB states clearly have had some success. States have begun programs to prevent students from dropping out of school and to attract those who do drop out into alternative high schools and other diploma-preparation programs. As a result, the percentage of younger adults (ages 18 to 24) with high school diplomas is closer to the goal of 90 percent than is the percentage of those age 25 and older with high school diplomas.

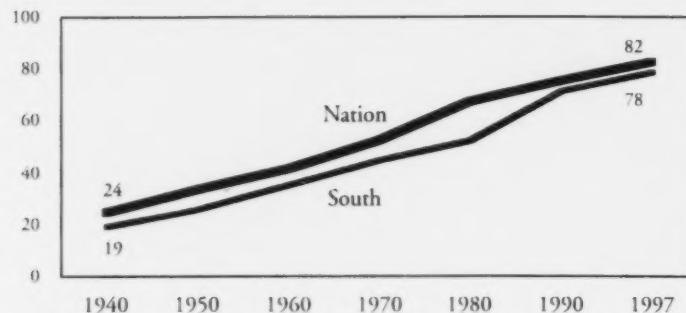
This report outlines progress that has been made, obstacles that stand in the way of further progress, and practices that might make a difference.

## *How much progress has been made?*

In 1950, only 25 percent of the adult population (age 25 and older) in the SREB states had completed high school. Today, fewer than 25 percent have *not* completed high school. Within two generations SREB states have

tripled the percentage of adults who complete 12 or more years of schooling. The educational gap between adults nationally and those in the SREB states is closing.

## Percent of Adult Population Who Are High School Graduates



The increase in the percentage of adults who have high school diplomas or the equivalent did not “just happen.” The change is the result of state and local efforts aimed at:

- identifying and attracting more adults into programs that prepare them for the General Educational Development (GED) tests (almost 200,000 adults in the SREB states earned a GED certificate in 1998 — 13 percent more than in 1990);
- supporting development of programs that combine adult education and parenting skills with early childhood education;
- encouraging business and industry to provide adult literacy programs in the workplace for employees;
- narrowing the gap between the percentages of white and black adults with high school diplomas; and
- reducing the number and percentage of young people who do not finish high school and attracting those who do not finish school into alternative programs that lead to high school diplomas or the equivalent.

In the SREB region and in the nation a greater percentage of younger adults (under age 25) than older adults (age 25 and older) have high school diplomas. On average, the proportion of younger adults who have high school diplomas or the equivalent is six percentage points higher than the proportion of older adults — ranging from one percentage point higher in Florida to 13 percentage points higher in West Virginia. All of this means that the percentage of the total population with high school diplomas will increase slightly, even if nothing is done to increase the number of adults 25 years old and older with diplomas.

In 1997, 78 percent of all adults age 25 and older in the SREB region had high school diplomas. The region has inched closer to the national average of 82 percent, and three SREB states (Delaware, Maryland and Oklahoma) are at or above the national average. Florida and Virginia are within a percentage point of the national average. No SREB state was at the national average in 1940, and only Florida was at the national average in 1950.

## ADULT EDUCATION

The region has made even more progress among younger adults. Arkansas, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia are at or above the national average of 86 percent.

Alabama is within one percentage point of the national average. Four SREB states (Arkansas, Maryland, Oklahoma and Virginia) were at or above the national average in 1990.

Table 1  
Population with High School Diplomas or Equivalent Credentials\*

|                | 18 to 24<br>years old | 25 years old<br>and older |
|----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| United States  | 86%                   | 82%                       |
| SREB states    | 84%                   | 78%                       |
| Alabama        | 85%                   | 76%                       |
| Arkansas       | 86%                   | 78%                       |
| Delaware       | 87%                   | 84%                       |
| Florida        | 82%                   | 81%                       |
| Georgia        | 84%                   | 79%                       |
| Kentucky       | 83%                   | 75%                       |
| Louisiana      | 80%                   | 76%                       |
| Maryland       | 95%                   | 85%                       |
| Mississippi    | 83%                   | 76%                       |
| North Carolina | 87%                   | 78%                       |
| Oklahoma       | 87%                   | 85%                       |
| South Carolina | 89%                   | 77%                       |
| Tennessee      | 84%                   | 76%                       |
| Texas          | 81%                   | 79%                       |
| Virginia       | 87%                   | 81%                       |
| West Virginia  | 90%                   | 77%                       |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

\* Three-year averages are calculated on the basis of 1995, 1996 and 1997 data.

Note: Shaded areas indicate the figure is at or above the national average.

### *What challenges will make it difficult to reach the goal?*

Several factors impede SREB states' efforts to achieve the goal that 90 percent of adults will have high school diplomas or the equivalent by 2000. One of the most serious challenges is that, according to state and national studies, many adults without diplomas lack the basic skills that are expected when students enter high school. SREB states need to increase basic literacy so that more adults will be equipped to pursue high school diplomas.

Results of surveys in SREB states show lower literacy levels for adults in these states than for adults nationwide, and the national

picture is a gloomy one. The most recent and largest national assessment of literacy showed that 21 percent of adults performed at the lowest level of literacy. Literacy was defined as the ability to read short text, locate information in the text that is identical to that in a question, enter personal information on a document and perform simple arithmetic. Examples of tasks performed successfully by those at the lowest level included identifying a country in a short article, signing their names at the appropriate place on a document, and totaling a bank deposit entry.

Table 2  
Estimated Percent of Adults (16 and Older) at Lowest Levels of Literacy,  
SREB States

|           | Percent<br>at Level 1 |                | Percent<br>at Level 1 |
|-----------|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Nation    | 21                    | Mississippi    | 30                    |
| Alabama   | 25                    | North Carolina | 22                    |
| Arkansas  | 22                    | Oklahoma       | 18                    |
| Delaware  | 18                    | South Carolina | 25                    |
| Florida   | 25                    | Tennessee      | 21                    |
| Georgia   | 23                    | Texas          | 23                    |
| Kentucky  | 19                    | Virginia       | 19                    |
| Louisiana | 28                    | West Virginia  | 20                    |
| Maryland  | 20                    |                |                       |

Source: Reder, Stephen. "Adult Literacy Estimates" (www.casas.org, Portland State University, 1996).

Another 27 percent of adults performed at the next level (Level 2). They could locate information in text, identify plausible but incorrect information, make simple inferences, compare information, and perform arithmetic operations using numbers stated on forms or in other material. Tasks performed by adults at this level included interpreting warranty instructions, locating eligibility from a table of employee benefits and calculating total costs of purchases from order forms.

This means that almost half of all adults in the United States likely cannot complete literacy tasks that require higher levels of reading and problem-solving skills, such as using a bus schedule to decide which bus is appropriate for a given set of conditions, writing a letter to explain an error on a credit card bill, or calculating miles per gallon using information on a mileage record.

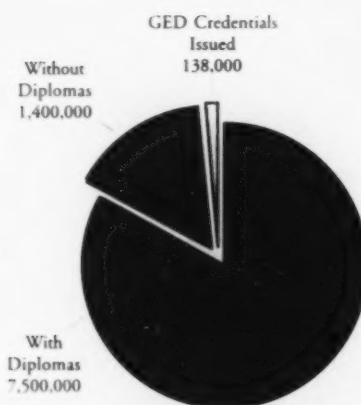
Estimates show that in the 16 SREB states the percentages of adults at the lowest level of literacy ranged from 18 percent (Delaware and Oklahoma) to 30 percent (Mississippi). At the two lowest levels (Levels 1 and 2) the percentages ranged from 44 percent (Delaware) to 64 percent (Mississippi). More than half of the adults scored above Level 2 in four SREB states (Delaware, Maryland, Oklahoma and Virginia). The national average was 52 percent above Level 2.

Florida estimates that 25 percent of all adults in that state read at or below the fifth-grade level. In Texas, 20 percent of the adults in adult education programs were enrolled in a program leading to high school diplomas; the other 80 percent lacked the reading, writing and mathematical skills necessary to begin secondary education studies.

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### Younger Adults (Under Age 25), SREB States, 1998

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Sources: American Council on Education, *GED 1998 Statistical Report*; U.S. Census Bureau.

## *Identifying and attracting more adults into programs that prepare them for GED tests*

There clearly is a need to strengthen efforts to increase literacy and prepare those who do not have the skills and knowledge necessary for employment in a demanding workplace. There must be a dramatic increase in the number working for and obtaining GED awards if we are to reduce significantly the percentage who do not have high school diplomas or the equivalent.

The number of people who earn high school credentials by passing the General Educational Development (GED) tests has increased by almost 13 percent since 1990, but only about 1 percent of all adults without high school diplomas earn GED certificates each year.

The picture is more encouraging for younger adults. More than 138,000 GED credentials were awarded to adults under age

25 in 1998 — 34 percent more than in 1990. Even so, only about 9 percent of younger adults without high school diplomas earned GED certificates in 1998 — a clear indication that much work remains to be done.

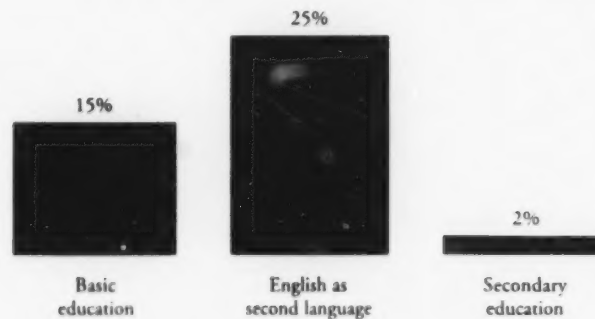
There are three types of state-administered programs with three different purposes:

- One type of program, called adult basic education, teaches basic skills that will enable participants to function effectively on the job and in society.
- Adult secondary education is designed to help participants earn high school diplomas or the equivalent.
- A third type of program provides instruction in English to adults whose native language is not English.

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### Percent Change in Adult Education Enrollment, 1990 to 1997, SREB States

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Source: U.S. Department of Education, Division of Adult Learning and Literacy.

Enrollment in state-administered adult-education programs has increased since the beginning of the decade. While this news is encouraging, most of the enrollment growth has occurred in the programs for basic education and English as a second language.

In the SREB region, 45 percent of students enrolled in state-administered adult-education programs are in basic-skills programs. Another

25 percent are people who are getting instruction in speaking, reading and writing in English. Fewer than one-third are enrolled in programs that lead to high school diplomas or the equivalent.

The number of people enrolled in programs that prepare them for high school diplomas or the equivalent has increased about 2 percent since 1990.

Table 3  
Enrollment in Adult Education Programs,  
United States and SREB States, 1996

|                | Total enrollment | Adult basic education | Percent of total | English as a second language | Percent of total | Adult secondary education | Percent of total |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| United States  | 4,042,172        | 1,555,709             | 38%              | 1,557,985                    | 39%              | 928,478                   | 23%              |
| SREB states    | 1,371,026        | 622,536               | 45               | 325,616                      | 24               | 422,874                   | 31               |
| Alabama        | 54,191           | 39,232                | 72               | 1,839                        | 3                | 13,120                    | 24               |
| Arkansas       | 43,315           | 22,103                | 51               | 2,451                        | 6                | 18,761                    | 43               |
| Delaware       | 3,956            | 2,355                 | 60               | 1,142                        | 29               | 459                       | 12               |
| Florida        | 450,575          | 161,073               | 36               | 145,934                      | 32               | 143,568                   | 32               |
| Georgia        | 91,845           | 46,760                | 51               | 17,900                       | 19               | 27,185                    | 30               |
| Kentucky       | 31,685           | 22,874                | 72               | 1,306                        | 4                | 7,505                     | 24               |
| Louisiana      | 47,712           | 25,768                | 54               | 1,997                        | 4                | 19,947                    | 42               |
| Maryland       | 28,478           | 11,157                | 39               | 8,503                        | 30               | 8,818                     | 31               |
| Mississippi    | 27,416           | 20,588                | 75               | 710                          | 3                | 6,118                     | 22               |
| North Carolina | 117,827          | 66,121                | 56               | 18,361                       | 16               | 33,345                    | 28               |
| Oklahoma       | 30,198           | 18,404                | 61               | 5,114                        | 17               | 6,680                     | 22               |
| South Carolina | 106,470          | 40,004                | 38               | 3,367                        | 3                | 63,099                    | 59               |
| Tennessee      | 50,889           | 34,151                | 67               | 4,188                        | 8                | 12,550                    | 25               |
| Texas          | 236,347          | 82,977                | 35               | 105,965                      | 45               | 47,405                    | 20               |
| Virginia       | 25,410           | 11,030                | 43               | 6,273                        | 25               | 8,107                     | 32               |
| West Virginia  | 24,712           | 17,939                | 73               | 566                          | 2                | 6,207                     | 25               |

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

## Promising practices

All SREB states have several programs to raise literacy levels and to increase the percentage of adults with high school diplomas. These programs target adults who are at least 16 years old, are not enrolled in secondary school and meet certain criteria. They may:

- not have mastered basic educational skills required to function effectively on the job, in the family and in society;
- lack high school diplomas or the equivalent; and
- not be able to speak, write or read English satisfactorily.

Workplace literacy programs are intended to help adults improve basic skills, especially job-related skills. Family literacy programs combine improving basic skills with offering guidance in parenting and parent/child interaction. Some programs target prisoners, and others target adults in public housing. Adult high schools provide opportunities to earn high school diplomas or GED certificates.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which continues the federal investment in adult education and literacy, consolidates more than 50 federally funded employment-training and literacy programs into three block grants for states: adult education and family literacy; disadvantaged youths; and adult employment and training.

The legislation has three purposes:

- to help adults obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency;
- to help parents obtain the educational skills necessary to assist in their children's educational development; and

- to help adults earn high school diplomas or the equivalent.

In the last decade, SREB states have taken actions and developed plans to improve the effectiveness of literacy and adult education programs. States have developed five-year plans to coordinate services provided by various public and private nonprofit agencies and volunteer organizations; to develop strategies to identify, recruit and serve populations; and to evaluate programs' effectiveness.

### *What states can do*

There are a number of things that states can do to improve adult education and literacy:

- States can use technology to provide training and staff development for teachers, administrators and volunteers who work in local communities. For example, Project INTER-ALT in Texas reviews technology materials that promote student learning in Texas adult-education and literacy programs. Professional development and technical assistance are provided on-site, at regional and statewide meetings, and through the Texas Education Telecommunications Network.
- States can use educational television and the Internet to deliver programs and courses that prepare adults to earn high school diplomas. North Carolina's Center for Public Television works with the North Carolina Department of Community Colleges to provide programs to adult learners who need basic skills instruction and to meet the needs of those enrolled in GED programs or the adult high school.

- States can help develop community-based efforts to coordinate educational services for adults. Georgia's Certified Literate Community program is a partnership among business, education and government that aims to improve the literacy levels of a community's children, families and workers. It helps communities combine scarce funding for adult literacy and recruit more adult students.
- States can provide incentives to attract adults without high school diplomas into programs that lead to diplomas. West Virginia's Literacy Foundation, in cooperation with the Governor's Council on Literacy, offers college scholarships to adults who pass the GED with a score of 250 or complete the Advanced Academic Program of the External Diploma Program offered by the American Council on Education's Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials. In Georgia, the HOPE Scholarship program enables GED recipients to qualify for a \$500 voucher for postsecondary educational expenses.
- States can encourage organized labor, businesses and industries, schools and colleges to work together by delivering tailored

instruction to work sites, using everyday work situations to teach basic skills, and linking industries in need of workplace education with local adult-education programs and services. The Workforce Improvement Network in Virginia creates links among employers, employees, adult educators and agencies that provide workplace-based services. It informs business, industry and government about how customized instruction in basic skills affects productivity. It also offers training for instructors and program developers and provides a network of people to help develop training that responds to specific needs.

- States can focus on building literacy skills for parents and their children. Kentucky passed legislation in the 1980s (KRS 158.360) to establish the Parent and Child Education (PACE) program. PACE has four components: an adult basic-education class; a preschool class; parent time; and parent and child time. It is one of several family-literacy programs that aim to break the poverty cycle by offering instruction in basic skills along with parenting skills and interactive activities for parents and children.

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